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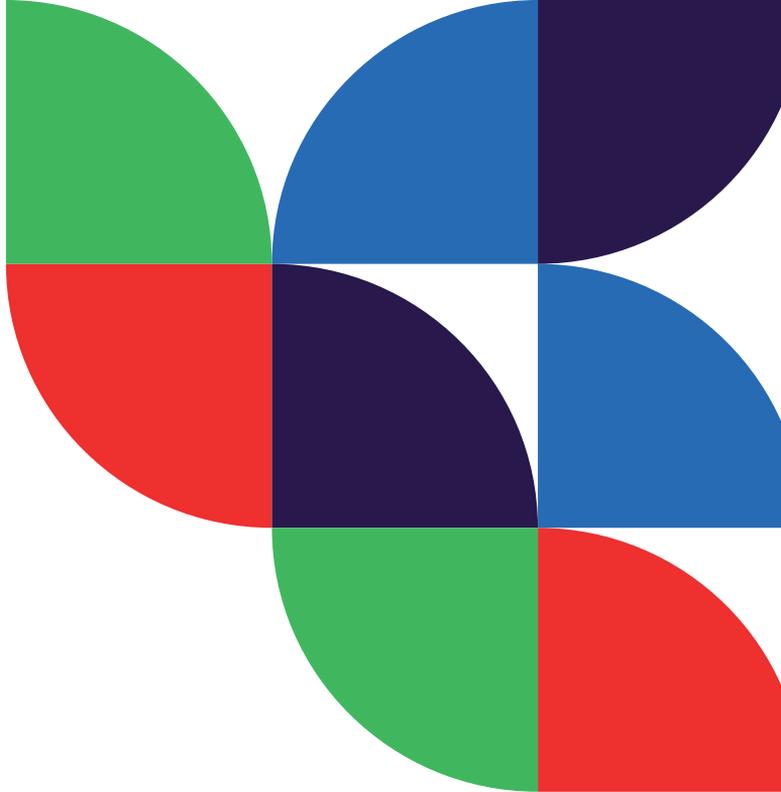


Implemented by  
Roma Active  
Albania

2024 MOST  
**ROMA**  
FRIENDLY  
**MAYOR**  
AWARD

Romani people are  
European citizens.

**Equal and  
Diverse!**



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Brussels: Directorate of Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2024

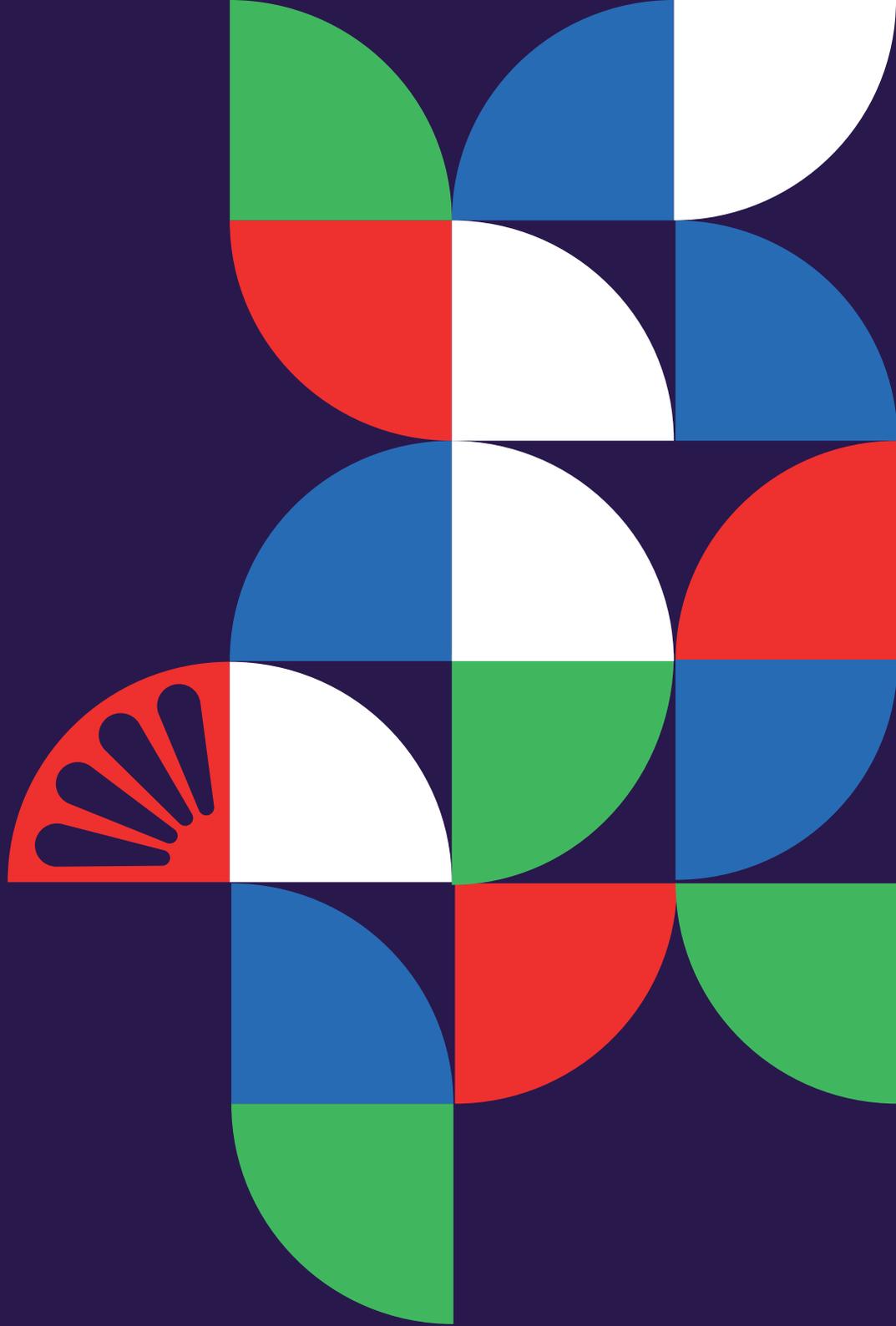
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# Foreword

## Olivér Várhelyi

European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

**This fourth edition of the Most Roma-Friendly Mayor Award** sends a message of solidarity. It **recognizes** positive examples of Roma inclusion and acknowledges the work of local authorities who listen to the everyday needs of the Roma people and deliver on them. The award is organized as part of the regional Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance project 'Romani Women Power of Change in the Western Balkans and Türkiye.' It is led by Roma Active Albania and its civil society network, with financial assistance from the European Union.

**Over the past five years, we have made significant strides in the integration of Roma communities in the Western Balkans and Türkiye.** In a landmark moment, the prime ministers from the Western Balkans adopted the Poznan Declaration on Roma integration in July 2019, pledging to achieve specific targets in the fields of education, employment, health, housing, civil documentation, and inclusion of the Roma dimension in the green and digital agendas by the time of accession. The implementation of these commitments and their future development are key topics in the annual Roma Ministerial. In a further testament to our commitment, the EU approved a 10-year strategy on Roma inclusion, equality, and participation in October 2020, followed by the adoption of new National Roma Strategies in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. The negotiations of Chapter 23, 'Judicial and Fundamental Rights,' also include discussions on Roma inclusion. Between 2019 and 2023, the EU spent more than EUR 45 million for Roma inclusion at regional and bilateral level on common projects. Today, our collective vision is to extend this successful work to our new partners: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia and introduce them our everyday role models.



**In 2023, the Commission adopted the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**, a comprehensive strategy aiming to accelerate the socio-economic convergence between the region and the EU. To fully harness the potential of this plan, it is crucial that our Western Balkan partners tap into all their talents, including those from vulnerable groups like Roma. The structural reforms outlined in the Reform Agendas should pave the way for Roma communities to enhance their access to quality education, public services, and decent work. These are all positive steps, but we acknowledge that there is still a long road ahead, and the local authorities have a pivotal role to play. The European Union remains committed to working closely with the Western Balkans and Türkiye, providing political and financial assistance to ensure tangible results for the Roma people.

**This year's European Parliament Roma Week award ceremony acknowledges the selected mayors' effort** bringing local authorities and Roma communities work together for the socio-economic development and well-being of their homeland. I congratulate this year's winners' dedication and outstanding work!

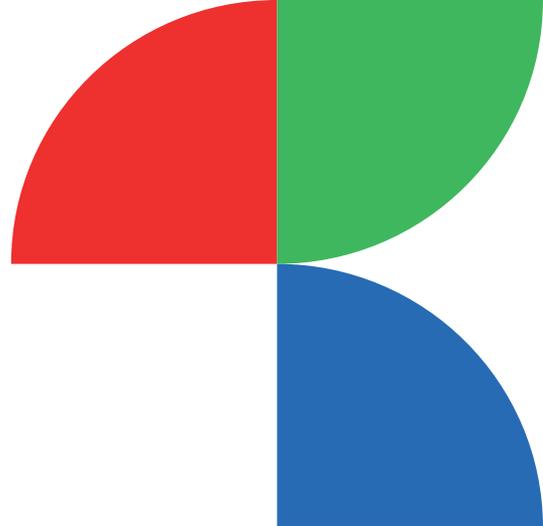
# Eriselda Sefa

## Mayor of Lushnja, Albania

Lushnja, a municipality in Albania's western lowland, has a population exceeding 130 000 residents, including a significant youth demographic (18%) and over 2 400 individuals from the Roma and Egyptian communities. Under the guidance of Mayor Eriselda Sefa, the municipality has prioritised engaging with marginalised groups, particularly the Roma and Egyptian communities, to address their needs comprehensively. In 2023, they facilitated 29 public hearings, actively involving Roma representatives in decision making processes.

Collaborating with local institutions, Lushnja has implemented various projects to empower vulnerable groups, benefiting 30 Roma families with employment, training advice, and participation in income generation schemes. Mayor Sefa emphasises the power of education for integration, supporting an educational centre that enabled over 240 Roma and Egyptian children to access quality education in the 2023–2024 school year. Additionally, the municipality works to improve social welfare, assisting 12 families with housing and 50 families with monthly financial support under the Social Housing Law in 2024.

Lushnja also organises educational activities addressing relevant issues such as bullying, discrimination, and domestic violence within the local Roma and Egyptian communities, fostering inclusivity and respect. Through these efforts, Mayor Sefa ensures equal access to opportunities and resources for all residents, promoting integration and harmony within the community.



*"This award means that I must work even harder so that everyone can feel even more welcome in Lushnja."*

**Eriselda SEFA**



# Ljubiša Petrović

## Mayor of Bijelina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bijeljina, a municipality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is home to 163 Roma families with 611 members, and an additional seasonal Roma population. To streamline communication and address their concerns effectively, Mayor Ljubiša Petrović and the city administration established a dedicated section within the administration for all minority groups.

The municipality's 2019–2023 local action plan for Roma inclusion was the only plan in Bosnia and Herzegovina recognising anti-gypsyism as a significant barrier. Mayor Petrović has since convened a multi-sectoral working group to develop a new action plan for 2024–2027, in line with the national plan for the inclusion of Roma people. Additionally, his administration actively supports Agro-Plan, a social enterprise fostering Roma employment and economic empowerment of Roma women. Financial support from the municipality enables Agro-Plan's participation in local events, promoting Roma entrepreneurship.

Education and youth development are areas of particular focus in Bijeljina. Mayor Petrović ensures funds allocation for textbooks and school supplies, specifically targeting resources for Roma children. The municipality advocates for access to preschool education, ensuring equal opportunities for early childhood learning. Recognising the vulnerability of Roma children to exploitation through begging, the Mayor champions initiatives for their protection and reintegration into society. For example, in collaboration with citizens' associations, Bijeljina provides shelter and support services to facilitate the return to education and overall wellbeing of exploited children.





*"First and foremost, we are all human beings, and our goal is to empower every individual, including every Roma citizen."*

**Ljubiša PETROVIĆ**

# Shaqir Totaj

## Mayor of Prizren, Kosovo\*

The municipality of Prizren, Kosovo, boasts a rich cultural tapestry, with the Roma community making up approximately 3% of its total population. Mayor Shaqir Totaj leads efforts to foster inclusivity, utilising community engagement methods like meetings and advisory committees to ensure that Roma voices are heard in decision making processes, and their needs met.

Recognising Roma culture, the municipality has declared Romani as an official language, removing a significant barrier between the Roma community and municipal services. To combat Roma unemployment, Mayor Totaj's administration partners with local organisations and vocational training centres to support tailored employment programmes (such as job readiness training and internships) and enforce anti-discrimination policies, providing legal support to combat instances of discrimination.

Under Mayor Totaj's leadership, education is also prioritised. Municipal initiatives aim to ensure equal access and support for Roma children, involving NGOs and community leaders in addressing specific challenges related to educational rights. By engaging with parents and community leaders, Prizren tailors its educational initiatives to tackle specific challenges faced by Roma youth, ensuring comprehensive support throughout their educational journey.

Ensuring fairness in healthcare is another top priority for Mayor Totaj. The municipality collaborates with Roma organisations and community health workers to address Roma health needs and eliminate barriers to accessing healthcare services. In this way, it works to ensure that every individual has equal opportunity to lead a healthy and fulfilling life.

\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



*"My aim is to never deny anyone the right to be recognised as an equal member of the community, with full prospect of contributing."*

**Shaqir TOTAJ**



# Marko Kovačević

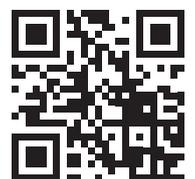
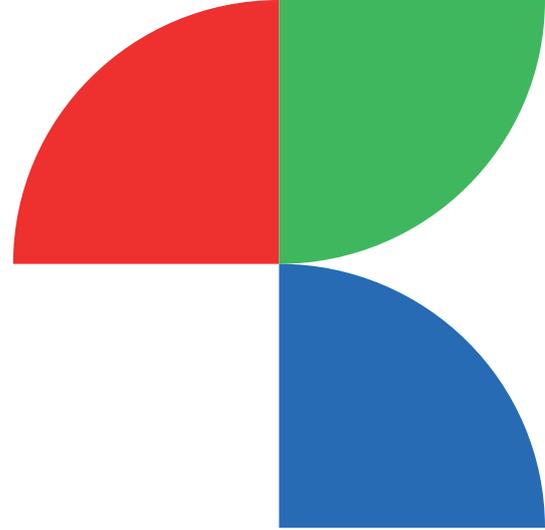
## Mayor of Nikšić, Montenegro

The city of Nikšić, Montenegro has a thriving Roma community who are actively involved in the municipality's decision-making processes. Mayor Marko Kovačević's administration prioritises inclusivity, frequently arranging consultations, focus groups and community forums to ensure Roma perspectives are acknowledged and Roma issues are taken into account. Under Mayor Kovačević's leadership, Nikšić is developing its 2024–2027 local action plan dedicated to Roma integration, in line with national objectives. This plan will prioritise projects aimed at improving living conditions, housing access, healthcare, education and employment opportunities, developed in close collaboration with Roma representatives.

Education is a central focus for Mayor Kovačević's administration, with initiatives designed to enhance access and support for Roma children and youth. Additional resources, such as extracurricular activities and mentorship, are provided alongside programmes promoting inclusive education to meet diverse student needs.

Thanks to Mayor Kovačević's efforts to enhance housing conditions for Roma people, 31 housing units have been constructed and 17 families relocated to buildings intended for displaced persons. Although not specifically targeted at Roma, these actions underscore the municipality's commitment to improving living standards.

Healthcare accessibility is also a priority, with initiatives addressing barriers such as language, discrimination, and lack of awareness. The municipality implements health education programmes promoting preventive practices and regular check-ups. Meanwhile, infrastructure improvements and recruitment of healthcare professionals aim to better serve Roma communities.





*"Many poets, musicians, and intellectuals have come from the Roma community. We want to awaken that potential and together build a better future."*

**Marko KOVAČEVIĆ**

# Zvonko Pekevski

## Mayor of Berovo, North Macedonia

Berovo, a municipality in North Macedonia, has over 10 000 residents, with Roma making up 3% of the population. The Roma community faces significant challenges, notably high unemployment rates and substandard housing conditions.

Mayor Zvonko Pekevski is an active advocate for the Roma community in Berovo. He regularly visits Roma settlements and organises meetings to address their needs. The municipality's local action plan takes a comprehensive approach, targeting employment, housing, education, health, and support for Roma women. Initiatives such as hiring consultants and tutors for Roma students, subsidising education for outstanding scholars, and providing training opportunities for the unemployed are key components of this plan. Presently, approximately 80 Roma individuals are gainfully employed in Berovo and an additional 65 families receiving guaranteed minimum assistance.

Under Mayor Pekevski's leadership, the municipality has embarked on ambitious infrastructure projects, including the construction of streets, water supply networks, and social apartments. These initiatives create both employment opportunities and enhance the living conditions of Roma families. Efforts to improve housing conditions for the Roma community are further bolstered by initiatives aimed at legalising illegally constructed houses and renovating inadequate housing.

Mayor Pekevski places particular emphasis on fostering inclusion and combating online hate speech against the Roma community. Through engaging with youth and monitoring online platforms, the municipality strives to create a more inclusive environment. Health campaigns are conducted to ensure equitable access to essential services and promote vaccination among the Roma population, with a specific focus on women's health.



*"It can always be better. Improving the lives of the residents can only be done by improving the conditions in all spheres."*

**Zvonko PEKEVSKI**



# Boban Đurović

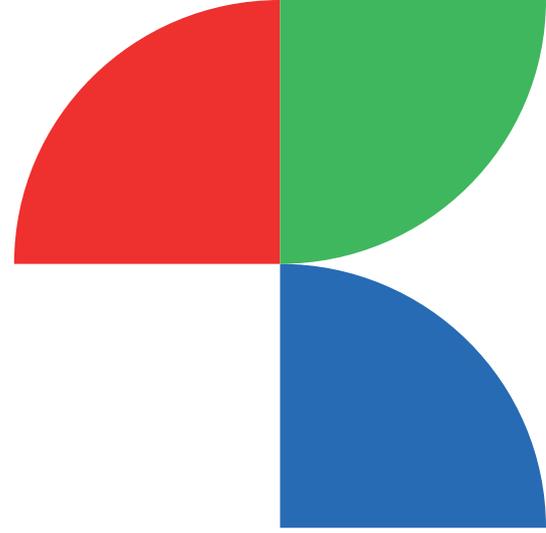
## Mayor of Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia

The municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, is home to a diverse population which includes 353 members of the Roma community. Since 2012, Mayor Boban Đurović's administration has undertaken systematic efforts to address the longstanding challenges faced by the Roma community. He also appointed a dedicated coordinator for Roma issues and established an Office for Roma Inclusion. The Office serves as a parliamentary body focused on addressing Roma-related issues under the guidance of the coordinator for Roma.

To ensure equal educational opportunities, the municipality has implemented various initiatives. These include providing tablet computers and laptops to primary and secondary school students, as well annual allocations of school supplies and monetary awards for first-grade students. Recognising the crucial role of education, Mayor Đurović's administration hired a pedagogical assistant in 2019 to support Roma children in their educational journey. The assistant aims to help children with their social integration, while also supporting preservation of their cultural heritage.

Through collaboration with various stakeholders and participation in national employment programmes, Mayor Đurović's administration has facilitated training and employment opportunities for 48 Roma individuals across various sectors, including placements at the LEONI factory in Kraljevo.

The commitment to Roma inclusion has not gone unnoticed by the national government. In 2023, the municipality received an award from the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government for exemplary practices in supporting vulnerable social groups, including the Roma population.





*"Through project activities, support, and empowerment of Roma, they became part of the community in our municipality."*

**Boban ĐUROVIĆ**

# Nebi Tepe

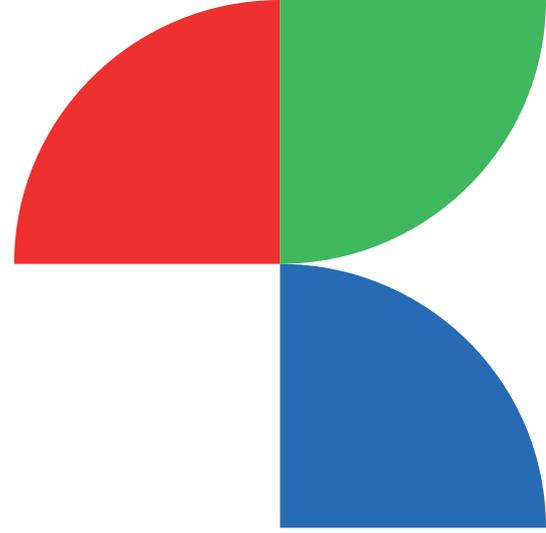
## Mayor of Muratlı, Türkiye

Muratlı, a municipality in Türkiye, is home to approximately 2 000 Roma residents. The Roma community faces various challenges, including prejudice and gender inequality. To tackle these issues, Nebi Tepe has adopted a collaborative approach, involving neighbourhood representatives and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. Mayor Tepe prioritises improving communication between ethnic groups to promote inclusivity.

Mayor Tepe's administration focuses on supporting female community members and addressing housing problems. Initiatives such as ROMACTED, a joint EU programme, have empowered Roma women in Muratlı to engage more actively in community life. The ROMACTED Women's Desk, established in November 2022, offers comprehensive services including education, healthcare, social inclusion, awareness-raising, and counselling.

Mayor Tepe has also made progress in Roma employment, with 30 Roma employees already hired and two Roma women employed under the ROMACTED Women's Desk. Efforts to support employment include organising meetings with employers, facilitating job notifications, and providing vocational training programmes (such as machine sewing courses) to enhance employability.

Mayor Tepe's administration also ensures children have access to education by distributing stationery, school bags, and uniforms to those in need at the start of each academic year. To help alleviate the housing shortage within the Roma community, the Muratlı municipality allocated 70 plots of land to residents without housing in 2023.



*"We are a big family who always stands together and always strives to find solutions to the problems that Roma citizens face."*

**Nebi TEPE**



